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Joseph, Jonathan (2007) Philosophy in International Relations: A Scientific Realist Appraisal. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 35 (2). pp. 345-359. ISSN 0305-8298.

### DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298070350021401>

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# Philosophy in International Relations: A Scientific Realist Approach

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Jonathan Joseph<sup>1</sup>

## How Does Scientific Realism Relate to International Relations?

The first question that most people interested in this forum will want to ask is; can we develop a specifically scientific realist school of IR? To get any disappointment out of the way so that we can move on to alternative questions, the short answer is no. Scientific realism is not a theory. In the main, I will draw on Marxism for my theoretical examples, while employing scientific realism to critically examine Marxist and other theoretical claims. Of course, scientific realism can be put to work on a range of different theories, although I find its relationship to Marxist theory the most convincing. What should be clearly stated, however, is that unless we want to change what we understand by scientific realism, we cannot meaningfully speak of a scientific realist theory of international politics.

This should not come as a surprise. When we talk of a realist theory of politics we immediately think of a substantive set of arguments related to the nature of politics and political activity that lays emphasis on the role of the state, power politics, self-interest, anarchy of the international system, and so on. This is a very different type of realism from the one we wish to develop here and when asked about the difference between political realism and scientific realism we inevitably find ourselves saying that they deal with different things or subject matters, one being a political theory or school, the other a philosophical approach that argues for the independent existence of reality, separate from our attempts to explain or understand it. If we are so quick to make this distinction between theory and philosophy when asked whether scientific realism is related to political realism, why should we suddenly wish to abandon it and claim that scientific realism can also become a theory of IR?

Scientific realism, therefore, is a philosophical position. In the simplest sense, realism means a belief in the independent existence of reality. In the line-up of different philosophical positions realism stands against idealist, hermeneutic, most constructivist and most poststructuralist philosophical positions on this issue.<sup>2</sup> Those approaches that draw on or are influenced by positivism, by contrast, may possibly

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1. Thanks to Doug Stokes, David Leon, Silviya Lechner and the referees for helpful comments. All the mistakes are mine.

2. Insofar as constructivism believes that the (social) world is socially constructed and is bound up with our beliefs and understandings. Poststructuralism argues that we can only know the world through the 'text' or particular discourses. Whether there is a 'real world' beyond this is a matter of little consequence.

be described as 'empirical realist' insofar as they believe that there is a real world 'out there' waiting to be discovered. Political or IR realism, therefore, might be considered realist in a philosophical sense as well. However, we might distinguish between the empirical realism of these positions and the scientific realism being advocated here in the following way. Empirical realism (which underpins realist, neorealist and neoliberal institutionalist theories of IR) only admits of the existence of a reality that can be directly observed. Scientific realism, by contrast, posits the existence of unobservable structures and generative mechanisms. It argues that empirical realist or positivist approaches that deny that we can talk of such structures<sup>3</sup> inevitably paint a picture of an atomistic world with no necessary underlying relations and indeed a significantly weakened basis for making causal claims of any kind.

So first we have distinguished scientific realism from theoretical approaches such as IR realism. Scientific realism, in contrast to the different theories of IR, is a philosophy not a theory, producing second-order, conceptual or meta-theoretical claims. Second, we have distinguished scientific realism from other philosophical positions that are influential in IR, such as constructivism and poststructuralism, on the basis of the belief in a reality independent of the knowledge we have of it (the former positions conflate the ontological status of reality with the epistemological issue of the knowledge we have of that reality<sup>4</sup>). Finally, we can distinguish scientific realism from the philosophical positions that underpin mainstream IR theories insofar as scientific realism goes beyond empirical realism in positing the reality of unobservable and underlying structures, processes, generative mechanisms and causal relations. What scientific realism brings to IR, therefore, is a philosophical argument concerning the epistemological stance and ontological assumptions of the various theories and approaches. While not being a theory of IR in its own right, it can criticise some of the assumptions of different theories by examining their philosophical underpinnings, while offering support to alternative theories by strengthening their ontological and epistemological claims. In particular, scientific realism is notable for taking a strong ontological stance, insisting on the need to move from disputes over knowledge claims to an investigation of the independently existing things that these claims are about (indeed this is the only way to understand such disputes). This approach can be defined as transcendental realism in that it shifts attention to that which must be the case for knowledge to be possible in the first place. Thus scientific realism focuses on the independently existing reality that knowledge tries to comprehend. It also draws attention to the ontological consequences of theoretical claims in terms of what they imply about the nature of the world. We will see how scientific realism might be used

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3. For example, Popper's demarcation criteria.

4. Of course this can be either implicit or explicit depending on how reality is defined. The hermeneutic tradition would argue that knowledge and reality are one and the same.

to question reified and atomistic (neorealist) or idealist (constructivist) views of international relations. In the next section we will look at the ontological consequences of neorealist arguments, before moving on to the constructivist alternative. As mentioned, the main focus will be on ontological issues, in particular, social stratification, the nature of material and ideational entities and the question of structure and agency.

### Some Specific Ways in which Scientific Realism might Engage in Debates about the Ontology of International Relations

We will start with a brief discussion of the influence and consequences of positivism in IR. It is probably best to leave aside debates about whether the classical realists were positivists or not. Part of the problem is that the term is now used so indiscriminately in IR that a positivist has become anyone who is not a post-positivist. One thing for sure though is that it is easier to pin the term positivist to Waltz's work.

Waltz's Theory of International Politics clearly makes assumptions of a positivist nature when arguing that scientific laws are based on the relations between variables along the lines of if a then b with probability  $x$ .<sup>5</sup> Waltz adds that theories differ from laws in showing why these associations obtain: in other words, theories explain laws.<sup>6</sup> We find Waltz arguing that 'first, one must conceive of international politics as a bounded realm or domain; second, one must discover some law-like regularities within it; and third, one must develop a way of explaining the observed regularities'.<sup>7</sup> The ontological consequences of this approach can be found in the familiar statements that 'The texture of international politics remains highly constant, patterns recur, and events repeat themselves endlessly ... The enduring anarchic character of international politics accounts for the striking sameness in the quality of international life through the millennia'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, Waltz's world lacks any social or historical specificity.

Like other positivists, Waltz embraces atomistic assumptions, in this case about states being the basic units and 'structure' comprising external relations between units. For all the talk that one should focus on the relation of unit to structure rather than interactions among the units, the structure is ultimately nothing more than precisely these interactions. Wendt is right to call Waltz an individualist.<sup>9</sup> He models his system on neoclassical micro-economic theory where individual interaction is key. Structural questions are no more than the arrangements of the parts of a system. In the international system each part is formally the equal of

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5. Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 1.

6. *Ibid.*, 6.

7. *Ibid.*, 116.

8. *Ibid.*, 66.

9. Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 15.

another.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately the system is a product of individual behaviour that Waltz assumes to be based on self-help or egotistical views. Thus the neorealist conception of structure is based on stable patterns of aggregate behaviour ultimately traceable to micro-level behavioural patterns.

The effect of this analysis is typical of any number of positivist approaches – that is to say, to naturalise a reified view of the social world (in this case its international system) and to hide the real nature of the international system by focusing on recurring relations between formally equal units. International politics is about discovering and explaining law-like regularities.<sup>11</sup> Even if we were to accept the argument about law-like regularities (which we should not), there is no possibility of conceiving of any underlying processes that produce them. Put in scientific realist terms, Waltz embraces an actualist philosophy that focuses at the level of events, but ignores the level of the real – those unobservable social structures, causal processes and generative mechanisms that produce the events. Unless IR theory is to switch attention to the level of the real, there is little possibility of saying anything about the specificity of international relations. Rather, as Cox points out<sup>12</sup>, neorealist and other mainstream approaches to IR merely ‘problem solve’ within an already predefined and limited field of analysis while leaving to one side real questions of social analysis. Consequently, such approaches reinforce the status quo and naturalise the relationships they describe, rather than critically questioning their underlying social basis.

Positivism is not an epistemology as such. It is a philosophy with both epistemological and ontological implications. The ontological implications are borne out in some theories of IR. For example, positivism’s assumption of atomism finds its ontological consequences in realist claims that the state is the basic unit of international relations and the levels of analysis argument that International Relations is about studying the external relations between states. As critical theory (as early as Horkheimer and Adorno) will argue, this is a reified view of the world that turns its back on underlying social relations. Of course, this reified view of the world may be a necessary simplification, but it is one that has consequences thanks to the epistemic fallacy of conflating such regularities with the real nature of the world itself, for the ‘scientific’ wave of realists would admit of nothing else – history, philosophy, human psychology, diplomatic writings and other ‘traditional’ approaches. This is also an assumption that the world can be talked about without reference to values, reasons or ideological factors. The fact – value distinction is not just about how to study international relations, but what to study or to make it more ontologically obvious, what there is of consequence out there that IR should concern itself with. This point is raised by Hedley Bull’s contribution to the Second Debate, although the ontological consequences of this should be pushed much further.

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10. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 88.

11. *Ibid.*, 116.

12. Robert Cox, ‘Social Forces, States and World Orders’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 10, no.1(1981): 126–55.

The Second Debate is considered a methodological debate over the way 'phenomena should be studied'.<sup>13</sup> But if we take up Bull's point that the 'scientific approach' is 'unable to develop any feeling either for the play of international politics or for the moral dilemmas to which it gives rise'<sup>14</sup>, this is because the 'scientific' approach ignores the reality of such things, that international politics is ontologically much more than what the supposedly scientific laws refer to<sup>15</sup>.

The ontological implications of positivist assumptions can be seen in most aspects of realist, neorealist and other 'rationalist' theories of IR. Since the debate over levels of analysis, initiated by Singer in 1961 and reinforced by Waltz's work, we can see more clearly how mainstream IR is underpinned by positivist assumptions about rational behaviour, taking states as the (atomistic) units of analysis, employing a billiard-ball model of state interaction, focusing on regularities and predictable outcomes, and generally presenting a reified social ontology that excludes underlying structures, causal mechanisms or constitutive processes.

So if we are to summarise this section, the first thing that scientific realism can bring to IR is a clearer understanding of the ontological implications of positivism and other philosophical positions – something that is often denied or obscured. It is common to see such issues as 'methodological' issues, such as is the case with the Second Debate, when in fact such debates have important ontological implications about what the world itself is like (as well as how it should be studied). Often positivism is talked of by IR theorists as if it is merely a methodology (for analysing the world) rather than having its own ontological assumptions about what the world itself is like. For example, a recent (very good) introduction to IR theory argues that positivism is a methodology, but then goes on to say that positivism views the world 'as having regularities and patterns that can be explained if the correct methodology is properly applied'.<sup>16</sup> This is tautological – positivism is a methodology that demands the correct methodology (itself). To correct this, we should say that positivism is a philosophical position that makes ontological assumptions about the world as comprising patterns and regularities that can be explained by the correct methodology. It is easy to see why the confusion arises, however. For positivism starts from the way it thinks the world should be studied, theoretically creating the artificial

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13. Klaus Knorr and James Rosenau, *Contending Approaches to International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 4. Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 31.

14. Hedley Bull, 'International Theory: A Case for a Classical Approach' in Knorr and Rosenau, *Contending Approaches to International Politics*, 20–38, 28.

15. Indeed, returning to our earlier point about classical realism, this same argument might be found in embryo in Morgenthau's *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics* (Chicago: Phoenix Books, 1967), a book at odds with the more positivistic elements of *Politics among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1985).

16. Robert Jackson and Georg Sørensen, *Introduction to International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 238.

conditions whereby regularities are obtained, then imposing these on the world (or more instrumentally, acting 'as if' the world were like this). This represents the 'epistemic fallacy' of confusing the real world with the means used to study it. By starting the other way round we can say that if the world itself (or the world of international relations) is much more than just constant conjunctions of events or empirical phenomena, then positivist-inspired theories are inadequate, perhaps even misleading, means of explanation.

### Constructivism I: Materialism and Idealism

Constructivism appeals to those scholars wishing to avoid the perceived mistakes of mainstream 'positivist' IR. My argument in the next two sections is that this narrow starting point is precisely the problem. In a short piece like this it is not possible to develop a detailed critique of constructivism. Instead, we will focus on two aspects which have important ontological implications – the structure–agency question and the idealism–materialism issue.

Constructivism is not a theory of International Relations<sup>17</sup>. Having said this, since most constructivists do not state what their theory of IR is, constructivism effectively becomes one. Constructivism makes a number of general assumptions that have to be addressed. It is based on a social ontology where humans do not exist independently of their social environment. But while constructivism rightly claims that the social environment constitutes who we are, this is seen in terms of a collectively shared system of meanings. Constructivism places emphasis on words, language and communication while the structure of the environment is seen as comprising rules and obligations. Nicholas Onuf states that constructivism begins with deeds, acts and spoken words.<sup>18</sup> He conflates these and the world itself so that a 'constructivist view denies that world and words are independent; it sees them as mutually constitutive'.<sup>19</sup> For Alexander Wendt, meanwhile, structure should be seen in social rather than material terms (Waltz, it is claimed highlights the dangers of a materialist approach).<sup>20</sup> For Wendt the basis of sociality is shared knowledge, hence he claims to take an idealist view of structure.<sup>21</sup> Wendt sees structure and structural change in cultural terms – again something seen as lacking in mainstream IR theory.

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17. Wendt, *Social Theory*, 7.

18. Onuf, *World of Our Making*, 36.

19. *Ibid.*, 94.

20. Dessler is quite right to point out that social and material do not stand in opposition and that the opposite of social is natural while the opposite of material is immaterial (David Dessler, 'Constructivism within a Positivist Social Science', *Review of International Studies*, 25, no.1 (1999): 123–137, 127 although it would seem that Wendt often has immaterial or ideational in mind when he uses the term social.

21. Wendt, *Social Theory*, 1, 20.

So what should we make of Wendt's claim that the structure of society is constituted by ideas rather than material forces?<sup>22</sup> It will be argued here that Wendt is right to argue that structures are not just material processes, but wrong to go in the opposite direction and claim that they are therefore ideational because they are social or cultural. Scientific realists try to get past this material-ideational question by insisting instead that structures – as underlying processes – are real and have real causal effects. They would agree that the ideational aspect of structures is important but would also point to the significance of the material aspect. This is captured in a number of Roy Bhaskar's formulations of structure. For example, he writes that structures are 'relations of various kinds: between people and each other, their products, their activities, nature and themselves'.<sup>23</sup> This is taken further in Bhaskar's later model of the social cube or four-planar model of social being based on: (1) material transactions with nature; (2) interpersonal, intra- or interaction; (3) social relations; and (4) intra-subjectivity<sup>24</sup>.

The materialist emphasis on relations with nature is emphasised in Marxist approaches that focus on the centrality of production. This need not imply reductionist materialism – as Wendt notes, the Marxist notion of production implies relations of production and various ideational aspects.<sup>25</sup> Production is a social, cultural and political process as much as a brute economic relation. Marxist approaches that take this position emphasise the importance of social relations of production rather than the more limited notion of forces of production. Or to put it differently, productive forces cannot be considered independently of the social relations that organise them. In the broadest sense, capitalism is unimaginable without private property relations and these in turn are established through a legal framework guaranteed by political sovereignty and an ideational belief in their legitimacy. Wendt's problem is that he notes this but then gets caught up in a critique of the limited conception of materialism derived from neorealism when he talks of such things as human nature, natural resources, geography, forces of production and forces of destruction.<sup>26</sup> Materialism gets reduced to questions of powers, resources and material capabilities, and the more complex and social view of materialism in Marxism and other traditions in social theory is forgotten.

The problem is that Wendt tends to reduce materialism to material capabilities, a direct consequence of starting from neorealism and Waltz rather than from social theory and Marx. Although Wendt does indicate the greater sophistication of the Marxist tradition, he still tends to see it in a reductionist light. He argues that what makes various approaches historical materialist is their 'pyramid-style approach to thinking about

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22. *Ibid.*, 25.

23. Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality* (London: Verso, 1989), 81.

24. Roy Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (London: Verso, 1993), 180.

25. Wendt, *Social Theory*, 94–5.

26. *Ibid.*, 23.

base and superstructure' or how 'material conditions are thought to constrain ideas'.<sup>27</sup> This claim can only be understood if the 'base' is interpreted as 'material base' and the superstructure as political and ideological. But, as mentioned, a Marxist approach that starts from the significance of mode of production can reject this kind of determinism by stressing how the mode of production contains social relations inseparable from political, cultural and ideational factors. Scientific realist approaches to Marxism have indeed engaged with exactly these matters of the way in which meanings and causal powers of material forces are embedded in contingent (or let us say historical) social relations.<sup>28</sup>

Wendt claims that agents and their interactions are fundamental to the causal powers of structure – they are, we could say, the stuff that structures are made of and 'to think otherwise is like thinking that the mind exists or has effects apart from the brain'.<sup>29</sup> This is confusing because of the different ways that reductionism can be understood. If we follow Waltz then reductionism is about moving from structures to the unit or micro-level of things such as individual interaction. But Wendt's example of the brain can instead be seen as an example of materialist reductionism. The reduction of the workings of the mind to brain matter might be compared to economic reductionism. But the clearest comparison is not the reduction of the social or the economic to the micro-level of individual activity as Waltz suggests, but the reduction of the social to the economy or the reduction of the economy to material forces – Wendt himself mentions the Marxist reduction of the social to forces of production. Scientific realists have been keen to avoid this kind of reductionism, but their view that the social world is stratified still recognises prior levels that higher levels depend upon and which may exert strong causal powers. Thus there is no mind independent of the physical brain, nor are there international relations without economic ones. The point is that the mind has its own emergent properties that are irreducible to those of the brain. The same might be said about international relations and the capitalist economy. So if we follow through with this understanding, then the result is the opposite of what Wendt has been arguing. The mind is clearly not reducible to the physical or material properties of the brain – it has its own specificity. However, it is also clearly dependent on the brain and the physical properties that make thoughts and ideas possible. The closest analogy to social structure is to say that interaction, ideas and those things we could describe as intersubjective are not reducible to material conditions.

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27. *Ibid.*, 168.

28. I am paraphrasing Wendt here. Alexander Wendt, 'On the Via Media: A Response to the Critics', *Review of International Studies*, 26, no.1 (2000): 165–80, 169. For scientific realist approaches to Marxism see Andrew Brown, Steve Fleetwood and John Michael Roberts (eds), *Critical Realism and Marxism* (London: Routledge, 2002), Jonathan Joseph, *Marxism and Social Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), Kathryn Dean, Jonathan Joseph, John Michael Roberts and Colin Wight, *Realism, Philosophy and Social Science* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006).

29. Wendt, *Social Theory*, 146.

However, these material conditions are necessary for interactions and ideas to be possible. Ideas and interaction exist to material conditions as mind exists to brain. The former are emergent and irreducible properties of the latter. Agents and their interactions, rather than being fundamental to the causal powers of structure as Wendt claims, are actually dependent upon the ontologically distinct causal powers of structures, although not reducible to them.

To take the issue of materialism further, we might say that the things constructivism talks of may be valid. We might say the same thing about poststructuralist notions of discursive articulation. But there must be something there in the first place to be constructed or articulated. It is no good simply saying that nuclear weapons are socially constructed or discursively articulated and that prior to this construction or articulation they are meaningless physical things (i.e. that it is only through discourse that they become meaningful). This merely raises a further question – what is it about the physical or material properties of something that allows it to lend itself to particular forms of social construction or discursive articulation? Not just anything can be articulated as a nuclear weapon; it has to have certain material properties. Social construction might help explain why a missile is regarded positively as something that provides security (as opposed to being a weapon of mass destruction), but the physical properties of something, far from being meaningless outside discursive articulation, are the very things that make social construction possible. Social construction might make certain meanings possible, but material conditions make social construction possible. While social construction is irreducible to material conditions and it has its own powers and dynamics, this should not stop us from recognising the way that these conditions both enable and constrain it.

Wendt and other constructivists are so keen to emphasise the ideational that they often turn a two-way relationship into a one-way one.<sup>30</sup> Thus social objects and practices are constructed by ideas. But what about the argument that ideas are shaped by objects and practices? This latter point is obviously a Marxist materialist one. Indeed one of Marxism's insights is to develop a concept of ideology based on the idea that it is generated by various social relations and practices (organised social activities). Althusser argues that ideology is secreted by social practices. Marx argues that economic practices generate misleading

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30. Elsewhere Wendt rightly says 'it cannot be ideas all the way down because scientific realism shows that ideas are based on and are regulated by an independently existing physical reality', Wendt *Social Theory*, 110. As Smith notes, Wendt shifts his view of the relationship between the material and the ideational. Sometimes he admits that social kinds are materially grounded (Wendt, *Social Theory*, 77) yet he also says that material causes are constituted by ideas (ibid., 94) (Steve Smith, 'Wendt's World' *Review of International Studies*, 26, no.1 (2000): 151-63 153-4). It is best to conclude that Wendt's views here are confused and he would do better to move away from the narrow confines of IR theory and clarify this relationship in relation to social theory.

social constructions such as the commodity form or the wage form. Thus the purpose of 'denaturalizing a previously unquestioned object or practice'<sup>31</sup> is precisely to show that the object or practice might be other than its social (ideological) construction suggests. This raises the issue of why things get constructed in the way they do. Why are some 'constructions' more powerful than others? What are the conditions of possibility for social construction? The Marxist answer to these questions, whether one likes it or not, ultimately resides in things like mode of production and material conditions. The constructivist answer is more difficult to work out.

In summary, the argument against materialism is an argument against either a simplistic materialism (neorealism) or a crude, reductionist materialism (some forms of Marxism).<sup>32</sup> Given all this, perhaps the answer to the question of the ontological status of objects, ideas, relations and structures is to say that they are all real. Both the material and ideational should be conceived in the context of real entities that exist independently of our conceptualisation and have real powers, liabilities and causal effects. Thus ideational things as much as material things can be said to have a real existence independent of particular conceptions and understandings we may have of them. This is a useful way of understanding the value of poststructuralist notions of discourse, resisting the temptation to reduce discourse to intersubjective understanding – although we would still have to guard against the poststructuralist tendency to overstate the significance of discourse.<sup>33</sup> Instead of getting too fixated on what is material and what is ideational we should instead adopt Bhaskar's distinction between the real and the unreal. Scientific realism maintains the independent existence of material

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31. Fearon and Wendt 'Rationalism and Constructivism in International Relations Theory' in *Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth Simmons (London: Sage, 2002), 52-72: 57.

32. Having said this, most Marxists would laugh at Emanuel Adler's suggestions that materialism takes the world as it is (Adler, 'Constructivism and International Relations' in *Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth Simmons (London: Sage, 2002), 95-118: 95). This is exactly what Marx argues against in that: 'The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism ... is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively'. Karl Marx 'First Thesis on Feuerbach' in *Marx Early Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 420-23: 421.

33. Of course there are more complex issues to address here. Foucauldian approaches to discourse, for example, slide between a distinction between the discursive and non-discursive and a view of discourse as embracing both ideas and material practices. Derrida's raising of the issue of what is beyond or outside the text is another complex discussion beyond the limits of this article. For some discussion of the relation between scientific realism and poststructuralism see Jonathan Joseph 'Foucault and Reality', *Capital & Class* 82 (2004): 141-63 and Jonathan Joseph and John Michael Roberts (eds), *Realism Discourse and Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 2004).

and ideational entities (for example, both commodities and commodity fetishism). Irrealism reduces such entities to the ideas we have of them.<sup>34</sup> Taking this step also allows us to understand the argument raised by Patomäki and Wight<sup>35</sup> that positivists and post-positivists share a common anti-realism in arguing, as Waltz does, that ‘what we think of as reality is itself an elaborate conception constructed and reconstructed through the ages’.<sup>36</sup> This means that positivists and post-positivists alike are irrealists if they deny the meaningful, mind-independent, enduring nature of these entities. As we shall see in the next section, this is an accusation that might be raised in relation to the constructivist conflation of structure with the activities and intentions of agents. But although this has shifted the discussion somewhat, we can still defend a form of materialism, now defined as a belief in the fundamental significance of material relations, without us having to say that realism is the belief in ‘matter all the way down’.

## Constructivism II: Structure and Agency

Having briefly discussed the material-ideational aspect of structure, we now need to look at how structure is produced or reproduced through human agency. Again, it is impossible to do justice to the variety of constructivist views so we will have to make do with a few selected arguments from Onuf and Wendt. My main argument is that their conception of the structure–agency relation is closest to Giddens’ structuration model, which sees structures and agents as mutually constitutive, thus effectively denying structures causal powers of their own. As Wendt puts it, ‘it is impossible for structures to have effects apart from the attributes and interactions of agents’.<sup>37</sup> For Giddens (and following him, for Wendt) structures only ever exist through their instantiation.<sup>38</sup> They operate only to the extent that certain rules and activities are followed by agents (in the present). Following Giddens, IR constructivists tend to regard structures as rules and resources rather

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34. Among other things. Irrealism is also denial of complexity, a favouring of the present over the absent and a reduction of reality to the actual.

35. Heikki Patomäki and Colin Wight, ‘After Postpositivism? The Promises of Critical Realism’ *International Studies Quarterly*, 44, no.2, (2000): 213–37. The realist view would also be at odds with Steve Smith’s claim that ‘social phenomena are indeed intersubjective and therefore cannot stand in relation to human subjects as *objects*; without this relationship scientific realism cannot operate’ Smith, *Wendt’s World*, 153.

36. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 5. See Patomäki and Wight, ‘After Postpositivism’, 217. In fairness to Waltz, he does say *what we think of* as reality, rather than reality itself, but this just shifts the problem from reality to ‘reality’. Postmodernists would also distinguish between a constructed ‘reality’ and the real world, and then declare that real world to be meaningless outside discourse.

37. Wendt, *Social Theory*, 12.

38. Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), 64–5, Wendt, *Social Theory*., 313.

than as internal and external social relations.<sup>39</sup> Doug Porpora writes that for a realist 'structure refers to the actual organization of society – the distribution of income, the division of labor, etc., – whereas for Giddens, structure consists of the rules and resources associated with those relationships'.<sup>40</sup> The scientific realist position such as in Bhaskar, Archer and Porpora<sup>41</sup> argues that structures and agents possess their own distinct properties. Structures are pre-existing features of the world we engage with that are relatively enduring and possess powers of enablement and constraint. Such a position is evident, if sometimes problematically so, in most Marxist theories with their focus on such things as the capital–labour relation, the tendency of the rate of profit to fall or the logic of capital accumulation. These examples illustrate how the causal powers of structures are quite distinct from the activities of agents, even if they cannot exist without agential activity. Agents, meanwhile, uniquely possess the powers of self-consciousness, reflexivity, intentionality, cognition and emotionality, things obviously quite distinct from the causal powers of structures. Clearly the different properties and powers of structures and agents cannot be reduced to one another.

Onuf enters the structure–agency debate on the structurationist side as soon as he says that people and societies constitute each other.<sup>42</sup> Because people make society and society makes people, he suggests that we should start in the middle of this relation – that is with the rules that link people and society together. Practices are then conceptualised as the making, breaking and, more usually, the following of rules.<sup>43</sup> When rules and practices form stable relations, these are described as institutions. Importantly, Onuf allows room for unintended consequences. Rules, institutions and unintended consequences together form what Onuf calls structure.<sup>44</sup>

It is clear that rules and practices are the things doing the work in Onuf's model of society. Indeed, so secondary is the concept of structure in Onuf's work that he advises dropping the term in favour of social arrangement – as passive a conception as anything to be found in the 'rationalist' mainstream. For Onuf structure does not exist as deep underlying cause, but is a surface thing that 'observers see'<sup>45</sup> and is

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39. Contrast Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method* (London: Hutchinson, 1976), 127 with the above-mentioned quote from Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality* (London: Verso, 1989), 81.

40. Douglas Porpora, 'Four Concepts of Structure', in *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, ed. Margaret Archer, Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Collier, Tony Lawson and Alan Norrie (London: Routledge, 1998), 345.

41. Bhaskar, *Possibility of Naturalism*, Porpora, 'Four Concepts of Structure', Margaret Archer, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

42. Onuf, *World of Our Making*, 36.

43. Nicholas Onuf, 'Constructivism: A User's Manual' in *International Relations in a Constructed World*, ed. Vendulka Kubalkova, Nicholas Onuf, and Paul Kowert (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 58–78, 59.

44. *Ibid.*, 61.

45. *Ibid.*, 62.

really not much more than social practice. Clearly most scientific realists would have a different conception of structure from this. Rather than making rules and practices pivotal, structure would be given much more significance as something dynamic, causal, deep-rooted and irreducible to agential activities. Rules would be important as part of practices while practices would be understood as the mediating factor between structure and agents.

Let me run through some of the consequences of this and relate them to the previous discussion about materialism. It is not Onuf's raising of the issue of rules that is being questioned here, but rather the fact that he gives analytical priority to rules as the mediator between people and society. Moreover, by focusing on rules, this inevitably takes a normative or ideational turn. Yet this does not do justice to practices since these are much more than just norms, ideas and speech acts – they clearly have a material aspect to them as well<sup>46</sup>. Work practices, for example, would be meaningless if understood only in normative or ideational terms. And this starts to point to the deeper issue of the reproduction and/or transformation of the most fundamental of society's relations. I will thus argue that rather than focusing on rules, norms and practices (with structure either being reduced to these or derivative of them), we should start with social structure, seeing rules, norms and practices as the media by which social structures are (largely unintentionally) reproduced and occasionally transformed.

Bhaskar's transformational model of social activity argues that 'people, in their conscious activity, for the most part unconsciously reproduce (and occasionally transform) the structures governing their substantial activities of production'.<sup>47</sup> Because structures pre-exist agents and provide the conditions for human action, they define and limit this activity so that the reproduced outcome is usually exactly that – social reproduction. It is only under particular circumstances that agents may act consciously to change or transform these conditions. And even then, this is within the limits defined by the structural context. This is not to present the kind of reified structuralist model criticised by Wendt that reduces agents to the mere bearers of structures. Although agents usually reproduce structures unconsciously or unintentionally, the very fact that structures do depend on agents for their reproduction allows for the possibility of transformative action. It is just that the transformational model insists that we define precisely what the structural possibilities and limits of this action are. Thus the transformational model challenges the reified view of structuralist and functionalist accounts of social action, while resisting the voluntarism of alternative approaches that give free reign to human praxis.

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46. Material factors are brought in by Onuf – he is in fact better at recognising these than many other constructivists. But again, this is not in their own right but only through rules so that 'rules make the world's material features into resources available for agents' use' (ibid., 64). This reminds us of Giddens, for whom social structures are not much more than rules and resources.

47. Bhaskar, *Possibility of Naturalism*, 35.

While structures depend upon human actions for their reproduction, these actions are already conditioned by the structures in a way which the actors are seldom aware of. This is not to say that agents do not act consciously, but their conscious actions generally are at a surface level rather than a deep one. To simplify somewhat, conscious actions take place at the level of practices but not of structures. Consequently, agents act consciously within practices, the effect of which is the unconscious or unintended reproduction of deeper (ontologically distinct) social structures. For example, Marxist analysis of the reproduction of capitalist society shows how, at the level of social practice, workers consciously sell their labour power in return for a wage (although of course workers would not consciously see it in these terms). The social practice – of going to work to earn a wage – entails a conscious act. When enough people do this, the consequence of the practice is the reproduction of the capital–labour relationship and other such capitalist structures and relations. Clearly the latter is not the conscious intention of most workers, yet it is the consequence of millions of people acting upon the intention to earn a wage. To give a different example from Bhaskar, most people do not marry in order to reproduce the nuclear family, yet this is the unintentional consequence of the social practice of marriage<sup>48</sup>. Underlying structures like the family or wage–labour relation depend on intersubjective practices but are ontologically distinct from them. Moreover, the ideas associated with these practices – the belief, for example, that a fair day’s work gets a fair day’s wage – are both necessary in relation to the sustainability of the intersubjective practice and false in relation to the underlying social relations (of exploitation) that these beliefs and practices ultimately sustain. My contention is that constructivism cannot deal with such issues because it cannot go beyond a social ontology of intersubjective relations or social practices.

It is precisely because structures and agents are ontologically distinct that Bhaskar introduces mediating concepts between structure and agency. He writes that ‘the mediating system we need is that of the positions (places, functions, rules, tasks, duties, rights, etc.) occupied (filled, assumed, enacted, etc.) by individuals, and of the practices (activities, etc.) in which, in virtue of their occupancy of these positions (and vice versa), they engage’.<sup>49</sup> The relationship between people and society is now understood as mediated through ‘positioned practices’ like marriage and work, which collectivise agents and reproduce the structures that society comprises through their stratified effects. By resolving this problem in scientific realism we can also offer a lifeline to constructivist accounts of the social world. Constructivism, rather than being dismissed as wrong, might have life as an account of positioned practices. These are the more conscious social activities that are in turn rooted in deeper structures with unconscious or unintentional consequences. My tentative conclusion therefore is that constructivism’s

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48. *Ibid.*, p.35.

49. *Ibid.*, 40–1.

'structures' are actually positioned practices that have to be conceived of as having deeper structures behind them.

### Summary

Perhaps it should be emphasised again that this piece is more concerned with presenting some arguments for scientific realism rather than developing a comprehensive critique of constructivism or IR theory. No doubt there are many constructivist arguments that are very different from the ones discussed here. But in a sense that is precisely the problem: that constructivism lacks a fully consistent and coherent argument. To a certain extent this is because IR constructivism is a response to neorealist conceptions of structure and materialism, which inevitably means an impoverished starting point.

We find a shift from the neorealist conception of structure as stable patterns of aggregate behaviour to a constructivist system of shared rules that also reduces social structure to an epiphenomenon of human behaviour.<sup>50</sup> As Porpora argues, approaches based on structuration deny the 'causal significance of objective, social relationships and ... the analytical priority of those relationships vis-à-vis intersubjective rules, norms, ideologies, and symbolic orders'.<sup>51</sup> For him, this is the difference, then, between social structure as material, and social structure as cultural and internal to the collectivity of agents.<sup>52</sup>

Talking of materialism, if we are to defend such a position, then Bhaskar makes a useful set of distinctions. First there is epistemological materialism, which upholds the independent existence and transfactual activity of some objects of scientific thought. Second is ontological materialism, which believes in the dependence of the social upon biological and physical being and the emergence (and hence irreducibility) of the former from the latter. Third, there is practical materialism concerning the constitutive role of human transformative agency.<sup>53</sup> Together, these present a more subtle and sophisticated version of materialism than the one defended by neorealists and attacked by constructivists. Indeed, the insights of constructivism can quite happily be incorporated into such a framework without making concessions to idealism.

Finally, it should be emphasised again that scientific realism is a philosophy or meta-theory. With apologies to those readers expecting a piece on IR, the next task is to work out how the above might inform a theory of international relations.

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50. Porpora, 'Four Concepts of Social Structure', 340.

51. *Ibid.*, 346.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Bhaskar, *Dialectic*, 400.

